

The Significance of Christmas for Rudolf Steiner

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Notes of a lecture by Virginia Sease in Princeton.

From notes taken at a lecture by Virginia Sease, PhD, at the Waldorf School of Princeton, on December 12, 2010, commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the Princeton Group. Dr. Sease is a member of the Executive Council (*Vorstand*) at the Goetheanum.

Rustic Nativities

Rudolf Steiner received his initial impressions of Christmas from the festive atmosphere of the Austro-Hungarian villages in the latter nineteenth century of his childhood. As Christmas approached, these neighborhoods were suffused by a mood he later described as magical breath that filled the homes and streets with joyful, hopeful anticipation. Even the poorest peasant householders would dedicate a corner of their dwelling to a crèche populated by wooden figures they carved themselves to represent the Holy Family and its pastoral or regal visitors, and above the scene always hovered an ingeniously suspended angel protecting the domestic setting of miraculous newborn.

As a boy, Rudolf Steiner enjoyed repeated opportunities to view such humble vignettes when visiting his neighbors. In light of Steiner’s towering cultural innovations, we can easily forget that the rural working-class comprised the social milieu of his upbringing. As an adult, he spoke of his sympathy (which today we might term *empathy*) with the proletariat as a natural result of having grown up among them.

The villagers of Steiner’s childhood went further than decorating their homes to welcome Christmas, celebrating the Nativity not only in consecrated space but also in dramatic time: The peasants enacted traditional seasonal pageants centered around the two archetypal narratives; every Christmas Eve they re-enacted the biblical stories of the Creation of the World, the Temptation of Adam and Eve, and the Expulsion from Paradise, and on Christmas Day the story of the Shepherds as recounted in the Gospel According to St. Luke.

Serious Play

Despite their homely setting, these productions were in no sense casual, but rather conducted in high solemnity: Preparation began at the end of the harvest season, when, in the age prior to electrical illumination, peasants—in that day men and boys only, including for the roles of Mary and the angel—would rehearse by lantern and candlelight.

Thanks to the insight and diligence of one of Steiner’s most beloved and inspiring professors, Karl Julius Schröer (1825-1900), we have been bequeathed one trilogy of these plays that today is performed in Waldorf Schools around the world. Through meticulous stenography, Schröer salvaged the triad performed in local dialect in the German enclave at Oberufer [literally: “Upper Shore”], a Hungarian village on an island in the Danube, for hundreds of years. These are exemplars of the genre that made a vivid impression on Rudolf Steiner as a child.

Essential to the profound effects the performances imparted was the manner of their preparation, which proceeded in an annual observance of strict rules imposed upon the actors recruited from the peasantry. These rules extended beyond actual rehearsal-sessions: Men and boys honored by the assignment were required to live a quiet and orderly life, apart from womenfolk, to abstain from alcohol and rowdy singing, and to memorize their lines promptly, on penalty of fines paid to the director, as well as for any other divergence from his instructions. Rudolf Steiner recalled these plays in such evocative lectures as “The Christmas Festival in the Changing Course of Time” (December 22, 1910, Berlin, GA 125) and others in 1915.

The Christmas season, culminating at Epiphany Day on January 6, was marked by a performance of the Three Kings Play to represent the Nativity as related in the Gospel According to St. Matthew. Actors arrayed in robes and paper crowns bore props of simulated gold, frankincense, and myrrh toward the

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infant Redeemer as they proceeded through the streets and into homes, where they would be welcomed to approach the prepared crèche. This tradition continues today in parts of Switzerland, whose residents receive children's dramatic offerings and expectations of reciprocal gifts from their hosts. The ceremony thereby gently inducts everyone's active participation into the festival that celebrates the Incarnation of good will.

Pedagogical Annunciations

On multiple occasions, for example in lectures given in 1915 and 1920, Rudolf Steiner held that Anthroposophy can serve humanity's present task by replenishing our ebbing natural piety through freely undertaken schooling in devotion. Feelings of reverence, once trained through forms of folk-religion, can now be suitably directed toward higher knowledge itself, as the first step along the path toward Initiation.

To help prepare children for a lifetime of appreciating worlds higher than their own personalities and material surroundings, soon after its founding in 1919, teachers at the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart presented the Oberufer Christmas plays as a gift to their students. This practice has spread widely, so that today the plays are performed at hundreds of Waldorf Schools worldwide. In their sensitive mixture of joy, humor, and piety, their universal appeal complements and transcends whatever formal religious training the children might receive at home.

Our speaker recalled her own experience with these plays as a teacher at Highland Hall Waldorf School in Los Angeles. In the early 1970s, a new tradition began: Out of their own initiative, twelfth-grade students there produced the Three Kings Play to round out the trilogy in which the teachers performed the Paradise and Shepherds' plays. Staging the latter, the teachers playing the shepherds, bundled in fleece and fur in the balmy southern California climate, needed the school air-conditioners to run at maximum capacity for a three full hours leading up to show-time, in order to conduce them convincingly to shiver in their roles as winter flock-wardens.

Some surviving alumni of the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart have testified that their impressions of the Christmas plays, performed prior to the school's forced closing by the National Socialists in 1938, sustained them through the dark times that immediately followed, and then accompanied the alumni as cultural nourishment into their tenth decade of life. This testifies to the truth of Rudolf Steiner's calling these plays platonic gifts streaming into the Waldorf School movement from the spiritual worlds.

Christmas as a Mantle of Sorrow

Thus hope can be refreshed through devotion inspired by incarnated wisdom. But in Rudolf Steiner's experiences of Christmas, this hope also sustained a bitter amalgam with tragedy, a juxtaposition that reached dramatic culmination on New Year's Eve in 1922, when an arsonist's fire destroyed the First Goetheanum, occasioning incalculable social, spiritual, and aesthetic losses. Products of priceless artistic and artisanal labor, such as hand-wrought fixtures of carved wood, and giant stained-glass windows etched by Steiner and his coworkers, were irretrievably destroyed in a single night.

But a resourceful individual has capitalized on the surviving records of the forms of the First Goetheanum. The present, second Goetheanum's capable Stage Lighting Supervisor retired some years ago. This essential coworker in eurythmy and drama productions lived at Haus Friedwart, a nearby guest-lodging, and so could use its basement as a studio in which to craft a detailed 1:20 scale-model of the First Goetheanum. When the burgeoning model outgrew its dwelling, a resident of a village thirty minutes' drive away made available to this energetic worker a barn of sufficient size to house the project. The craftsman's remarkable feat replicates the lost structure in fine detail: Each type of wood, originally selected on the basis of its esoteric qualities, is reproduced, species for species; roofing slate imported from Norway, glass brilliantly stained and inscribed with pictures by dentist drill, and all other minutia are represented in the same materials and techniques in miniature. This work progressed until the twin cupolas outgrew even its capacious barn and was transported to the room adjacent to the famous Representative of Mankind sculptural grouping, where it was installed on Michaelmas Day for display and can be now be viewed by the visiting public. We were encouraged not to miss the opportunity.

A Festival of Birth and Rebirth

Although, through the burning of the First Goetheanum on New Year's Eve 1922, tragedy occurred at the end of the Christmas festival, Rudolf Steiner never allowed grief to overcome him. This is evident from his immediate resolve and execution to plan a new Goetheanum to replace the one destroyed by fire. The fruits of this determination are gradually gaining recognition outside anthroposophical circles as well, for example in a recent book, published in France, assessing the past millennium's twelve most significant (western) human achievements: The collection lists the First and Second Goetheanums together with the Cathedral of Chartres and Hagia Sophia, and includes Rudolf Steiner among the twelve individuals considered historically most significant.

Nor was such renewal limited to the material plane. Christmas was the season Steiner chose for the renowned 1923 refounding of the General (or perhaps better termed *Universal*) Anthroposophical Society. One of its central aspects was the innovative laying of its Foundation Stone, not physically but rather as a powerful mantric verse planted in the hearts of the renewed Society's members present at the festive conference, which stretched from Christmas Day through New Year's Day 1923–1924. The first event on the program in the afternoon of December 24th was in fact the Oberufer Paradise Play, by necessity presented in the carpentry workshop in lieu of the theater-building that had been burned, followed by a performance of the Shepherds' Play on Christmas Day and again on December 29th, and the Three Kings' Play on December 27th and December 31st.

The day after Christmas, celebrated as the "Second" Christmas Day in Europe, also saw one of the early performances of eurythmy, an art that today we still rightly call young, and therefore then in its very infancy. The production was prefaced by an address in which Steiner emphasized the place of eurythmy at every true celebration.

Christmas Articulated Through Meditative Verse

The Foundation Stone Meditation itself evokes the original Christmas in its concluding Fourth Panel. In recent centuries of recapitulating the biblical narratives of the birth of Jesus, Christendom has remarked on the differences between the Gospels of Luke and Matthew: Luke 2:1-20 relates the story, now long familiar, depicting the Annunciation to the shepherds and their visitation to the child lying in a manger, while Matthew 1:18-2:12 recounts priestly kings who presented their gifts to the occupants of a house. These two depictions, emphasizing the forces of warmth and light respectively, meet in our awareness at every recitation of the Fourth Panel of the Foundation Stone Meditation.

Although today it is common to find these two scenarios conflated into a single tableau, such was not the case prior to the eighteenth century, when the kings and shepherds might be depicted in adjacent settings, but never staged as mingled. This iconological distinction suggests an intuitive, artistic recognition of the veiled historical truth that the diverse stories are indeed distinct and symbiotic, a relation the Fourth Panel of the Foundation Stone Meditation recognizes by juxtaposing their complementary meanings of Christmas for human evolution:

At the turning point of time
The Spirit-light of the world
Entered the stream of earth existence.
Darkness of night
Had ceased its reign;
Day-radiant light
Shone forth in human souls:
Light
That gives warmth
To simple shepherds' hearts;
Light
That enlightens
The wise heads of kings.

Light divine,
Christ-Sun,
Warm
Our hearts;
Enlighten
Our heads;
That good may become
What from our hearts
We are founding,
What from our heads
Through our heads
We direct,
With single will.

Advent of the Future

On the 75th Anniversary of anthroposophical group-work in Princeton, as we contemplate these iterations of Christmas from the founder of anthroposophy, we may wonder: How will it be in another twenty-five years' time, when some present will be participating from "upstairs" (as a friend of the speaker genially terms post-mortem spiritual residency), while others among us will have grown aged,

still others reaching midlife, and perhaps some now yet unborn, will take part? Such imagining carries the hope that we will celebrate the centenary of the work of the Princeton group within a whole life of anthroposophy. For the life of anthroposophy is in fact always a whole whenever people are working together out of its spirit.

Special thanks are due to Virginia Sease for reviewing the text.

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